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# The Effectiveness of Living Learning Communities on Residence Hall Students

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The Effectiveness of Living Learning Communities on Residence Hall Students

Jessica Repko

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### **Abstract**

In the last few decades, the effort to improve the value of higher education for undergraduate students has been of integral importance to educators on college campuses across the nation. Through these efforts, professionals within higher education have sought to extend students' educational experiences beyond the classroom and into residence halls. At The University of Akron, this has been done specifically in the form of living learning communities (LLCs), with the goal to benefit both the residents in the LLCs and the resident assistants (RAs) that oversee the LLCs. The goal of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the current LLC model that is used at The University of Akron. In this study, a survey was given to two groups of residence hall students in South Hall: first year living learning community students, and first year non-living learning community students. The responses from these surveys were compared to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the living learning communities on first year students. Then, interviews were conducted with the LLC residents to find common themes that were successful or unsuccessful within the LLCs. Surveys were also given to the RAs of the LLCs in South Hall to determine the effectiveness of holding a leadership position for an LLC, and these RAs were also interviewed to search for common successes or shortcomings within the LLCs in South Hall. The findings for LLC students indicated slight differences between the experiences of LLC and non-LLC students, and the findings from the resident assistants indicated that there is room for improvement within the program.

### **The Effectiveness of Living Learning Communities on Residence Hall Students**

Colleges and universities strive to create environments where students will be able to flourish and succeed in the classroom. It is a widespread belief amongst colleges and universities that students that do well in their first year of college are more likely to stay in college and ultimately graduate from their institution (Hunter, 2006). Because many first year students reside in the residence halls, they have become an attractive location for implementing new ideas that aim to foster student success. One of these ideas took form as living learning communities, where academics meet living on campus through specialized programming, working with faculty and staff, and many other initiatives that take place within the residence halls. These communities may also be known as residential learning communities, or a variation of this sort, at other institutions. For the purpose of this research, they will be referred to as living learning communities, or LLCs.

Living learning communities were molded from the concept of learning communities, which enable students to take classes together. Learning communities may contain a few classes that are aligned in content or last for an academic year with students studying the same material. Learning communities have existed for nearly a century in higher education, dating from the 1920s and their implementation at the University of Wisconsin (Smith, 2001). In their basic form, according to Vincent Tinto (2003), learning communities all have three things in common: shared knowledge to create a coherent curricular experience, shared knowing to create relationships between students and their shared knowledge, and shared responsibility to keep students accountable in their learning. Their longevity in the realm of higher education has allowed time for research on their successes; various studies from different researchers have discovered positive results from the learning communities (Stassen, 2003). The living learning

community aims to take this one step further, and allow these students to reside together in a residence hall to create an all-encompassing experience for the student. By inviting faculty and staff into the residence hall and providing students with student staff members involved in similar majors or interest groups, learning continues to take place even outside of the classroom.

It has already been found through several studies that participating in living learning communities is beneficial to students' overall first year experience, regardless of the longevity or the developmental state of the living learning community (Stassen, 2003). According to Gary Pike (1999), living learning communities tend to positively impact student involvement (and differentiation within their involvement), day-to-day behaviors of students, and the integration of course information in conversations. The living learning communities help students bring information into their everyday lives, bridging the gap between a student's academic life and their personal life through building personal relationships and increasing student interest.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the current model for the living learning communities at The University of Akron is effective in creating an enhanced experience for first year students and for the upperclassmen resident assistants that lead the communities. The research studies the effect, if any, that these organizations have on first year students that actively participate with their living learning community and the effect, if any, that they have on the students that lead them. The research design involves two parts: a portion comparing the experiences of LLC students with non-LLC students, and a portion containing an analysis of the LLC RA experience. The LLC vs. non-LLC data was gathered through a satisfaction survey and follow-up interviews with participating LLC students. The RA data was gathered through similar means, also utilizing a satisfaction survey and follow-up interviews.

### **The University of Akron LLC Structure**

The goal of a living learning community, according to The University of Akron (2018), is to “provide distinctive settings where student academic success is supported through residential experiences.” As of April 2018, the University offers twenty living learning communities to its first year residents residing in three residence halls: South Hall, Spicer Residence Hall, and Ritchie Residence Hall. Of the living learning communities that are offered, twelve are major-focused (e.g. business, engineering, education, nursing, fine arts, pre-med, etc.) while the remaining LLCs are focused on specific interests (e.g. leadership, wellness, outdoors, ROTC, etc.). According to The University of Akron, the living learning communities aim to “provide special attention to first year students, offer mentoring opportunities to upperclassmen, focus on academic achievement in a productive and supportive setting, foster the joining of the scholarly and social aspects of student life, and promote collaboration among faculty, staff, and students.” These goals were the main instruments used in creating the questions for the surveys and interviews that were utilized in this study.

The University of Akron utilizes an application process for students who want to participate in the living learning communities. After completing their housing contract, students can indicate interest in a living learning community, where they are then directed to an application process that consists of several essay questions. Students who accept the LLC offer must live in the building where their desired LLC is housed. In Spicer and South Hall, each floor typically houses two LLCs, with anywhere from fifteen to over one hundred students in a given LLC. The coordinator of the living learning communities decides whether or not students should be selected to participate in an LLC, the students are notified, and then gain a spot in the guaranteed housing spaces for LLC students. If students are not initially selected, there is an

alternate pool for each LLC. If students decide not to live in the designated LLC space or decline their LLC offer, offers will be extended to those in the alternate pool.

After students are accepted into the LLC, the first interaction they have with other LLC members, and their RA, is at the Living Learning Community Summer Social, which typically takes place a month or so before students move in. Faculty advisors are also welcome at this event, creating a space for students, student staff, and faculty members to mingle and meet one another. While living on campus in an LLC, they can expect to have three programs specific to their LLC per semester, with one to two additional LLC events per semester that aim to bring together students from all of the LLCs.

### **University of Akron LLC Resident Assistants**

Becoming the resident assistant for a living learning community at The University of Akron is considered a supplemental leadership experience in addition to the expected RA job duties. The minimum qualifications are similar to that of a standard RA, with the addition of having advanced knowledge and programming skills for a specific major, academic area, or interest group. The position is available to both returning RAs and to RAs that are considered new hires.

According to the position description for the 2017-2018 academic year, the main focus of the LLC RA position is to “act as a liaison between LLC students, LLC faculty advisor, and Residence Life staff to coordinate programs/events” (Job Description, 2017). The LLC RAs are expected to create and facilitate three relevant programs for their LLC, as well as assist in the LLC-wide programming initiatives that take place throughout the semester. Other job responsibilities include meeting with the LLC’s faculty advisor twice per semester, holding four

weekly community hours within the residence hall, attending the summer social, and attending bi-weekly meetings with their LLC supervisor. For meeting these additional responsibilities, RAs are awarded a stipend throughout each semester of employment.

The goal of the LLC RA position is for these student staff members to gain additional leadership and mentoring skills. The aforementioned responsibilities intend to aid student staff in this process. For the scope of this research, it may be important to note that the LLC RA position is fairly new in its current implementation. Although the LLCs have existed since 2010, the position was formerly held by students that were not in the RA role, titled peer mentors. Peer mentors had the position responsibilities mentioned above without the standard RA obligations, while the RAs just had a major or interest that pertained to the LLC. The LLC position became an additional opportunity for RAs during the 2016-2017 academic year after the peer mentor position was eliminated. This was a huge shift in the LLC dynamics for The University of Akron and may contribute to some of the findings of this research.

## **Methods**

### **Residence Hall Students**

#### *Participants*

Eighty first year residential students, whom are enrolled at The University of Akron living in South Residence Hall, voluntarily participated in the survey research. Thirty-five of the eighty students were living learning community residents, representing each of the nine living learning communities in South Hall. The remaining forty-five students lived in South Hall without participating in an LLC, and they represented all six floors of South Hall. Since participation in this research was open to any first year student in South Residence Hall, both



LLC and non-LLC students had a variety of majors and different resident assistants to alter their experiences living within a residence hall.

Ten first year living learning community students that participated in the survey research voluntarily participated in the interview research. These ten students represented five living learning communities, which was at least half of the living learning communities in South Hall.

### *Materials*

Each survey contained ten questions, the first identifying whether the student was a living learning community student, and the remaining nine questions asking students to rate their agreement with a statement on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). Choosing not to provide a neutral answer is helpful for producing meaningful results. The survey was handed out to residents in public meeting spaces, and they were given the option to complete it there, or return it after completing it in private.

Each interview contained ten questions asking residents to reflect on their LLC experiences. The interviews were conducted in private spaces, and participants' responses were recorded throughout the interview.

### *Procedures*

While the surveys provided were the same, the first question on the survey indicated whether or not students were participants in the living learning communities. There were some students that were unsure whether or not they belonged to a living learning community, and these surveys were discounted. However, the number of these students was noted to observe how many students were unfamiliar with the LLCs, which totaled to six students. Students were offered the surveys in similar social settings, including floor meetings or as students passed by South Hall's service desk. Upon receiving the completed surveys, surveys were sorted by LLC or

non-LLC, and each response was recorded. The responses were tallied by the score given to each prompt, and an average was taken for each question to determine the overall agreement with a statement. These averages were then compared to analyze the difference in opinions between LLC and non-LLC students. To determine the effectiveness or success of the prompts, a statistically significant difference in responses between LLC and non-LLC must be present, in addition to an average score of 4.5 in response to the prompt. 4.5 lies between slightly agree and agree, and achieving a score above slightly agree will indicate effectiveness for a prompt in the scope of this research.

Recruitment for the interview research happened alongside recruitment for survey participation. If students expressed interest in participating in interview research, they were asked to sign up for a time slot to be interviewed. The interviews consisted of ten questions, where students were able to answer as little or as much as they desired. Interviews took approximately fifteen minutes, where the participant was recorded as their responses were typed. The questions were designed to encourage residents to expand upon the questions that were asked in the survey to get a clearer understanding of the successes and shortcomings within the living learning communities. Common themes were found within their responses to draw these conclusions.

## **Resident Assistants**

### *Participants*

Nine resident assistants of the living learning communities in South Hall voluntarily participated in the survey research. These resident assistants were comprised of first year LLC RAs and returning LLC RAs. Six of these nine resident assistants also voluntarily participated in

the interview research. Every resident assistant was from a different living learning community for the interview portion of the research.

### *Materials*

Each survey consisted of nine questions, where resident assistants were asked to rate their agreement with a statement on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). The survey was given to RAs in their staff mailboxes, and they could return the surveys anonymously to my personal staff mailbox. Each interview consisted of nine questions, asking resident assistants to reflect on their experiences. The interviews were conducted in private spaces, and participants' responses were recorded throughout the interview.

### *Procedures*

Surveys provided to each RA were identical, and all provided in an identical setting. Surveys were placed in the RA staff mailboxes and were to be returned to my staff mailbox to maintain anonymity of responses. Upon collecting the completed surveys, the responses were tallied by the score given to each prompt. Then an average was taken for each question to determine the overall agreement with a statement. The averages were analyzed to draw conclusions about the experiences of LLC RAs. To determine the effectiveness or success of the prompts, a score of 4.5, which lies between slightly agree and agree, should be achieved for a component of the LLC RA experience to be considered successful.

Recruitment for the interview research took place after the survey participation. If RAs expressed an interest in participating in interview research, an interview time was arranged, and RAs were asked to answer nine questions in as much or as little detail as they desired. Interviews took approximately fifteen minutes, where each participant was recorded as their responses were typed. The questions were designed to encourage RAs to reflect on their experiences, expand

upon the questions asked in the survey, and identify successes and areas for improvement within the LLCs. Common themes were found within their responses to draw these conclusions.

### **Limitations**

While this study takes a range of students into account, the analyses may not be representative of the entire living learning community population at The University of Akron. Because only students and student leaders in South Hall were invited to participate, the study reflects the experiences of the students that live in that particular building, and may not necessarily be reflective of the LLC population in general. Another limitation is student motivation, whether that is the participating student or the resident assistant leading the community. This has the potential to alter some of the results, because some students make the choice not to get involved with their LLC, and the RAs lead their LLCs with differing levels of involvement and commitment. The turnover of people participating in the LLC could also affect answers to the surveys or interviews. Because only first year students participate in the LLCs, they are commenting on their experiences after only one semester. The students leading the LLCs also have varying experiences with the living learning communities, and this should be considered when analyzing the discovered results.

## **Results**

### **Residence Hall Students Data**

Averaged responses of both LLC and non-LLC respondents are located in Table 1. Out of the eighty participants, thirty-five were LLC students while forty-five were non-LLC students. The total number of each response (strongly disagree – 1, disagree – 2, slightly disagree – 3,

slightly agree – 4, agree – 5, and strongly agree – 6) were recorded for each response and used to calculate the mean. For this study, the mean was used to analyze results to get a general idea of the average answer of LLC participants and non-LLC participants. It is important to note that there are several different ways in which this data could have been analyzed, but mean was selected to find a consensus of each group's answers. Standard deviations were included to show the differences in responses between students in each group. Participant responses to each question ranged from one to six for the majority of the prompts, with LLC residents tending to select more 4's, 5's, and 6's for their answers.

Table 1

	Average Satisfaction of LLC Residents	Average Satisfaction of non-LLC Residents	P-Value	Std. Dev. LLC	Std. Dev. Non-LLC
Item 1	5.29	4.89	0.068	0.825	1.092
Item 2	5.09	4.78	0.220	1.121	1.085
Item 3	5.00	4.49	0.086	1.328	1.272
Item 4	5.34	4.96	0.174	1.187	1.331
Item 5	5.09	4.24	0.010	1.314	1.540
Item 6	4.77	4.33	0.138	1.215	1.398
Item 7	5.06	4.33	0.014	0.998	1.552
Item 8	4.83	4.38	0.194	1.524	1.527
Item 9	5.09	4.36	0.016	1.222	1.417

Achieving a score of 4.5 to indicate effectiveness means that participants' answers, on average, landed above the "slightly agree" response option. Using this method, the data shows that the LLCs were effective in all items for living learning community students. Although looking at the mean would suggest that LLC students had a better experience overall, a two-tail t-test with two samples assuming unequal variance was performed on each question to determine statistical significance of participant responses.

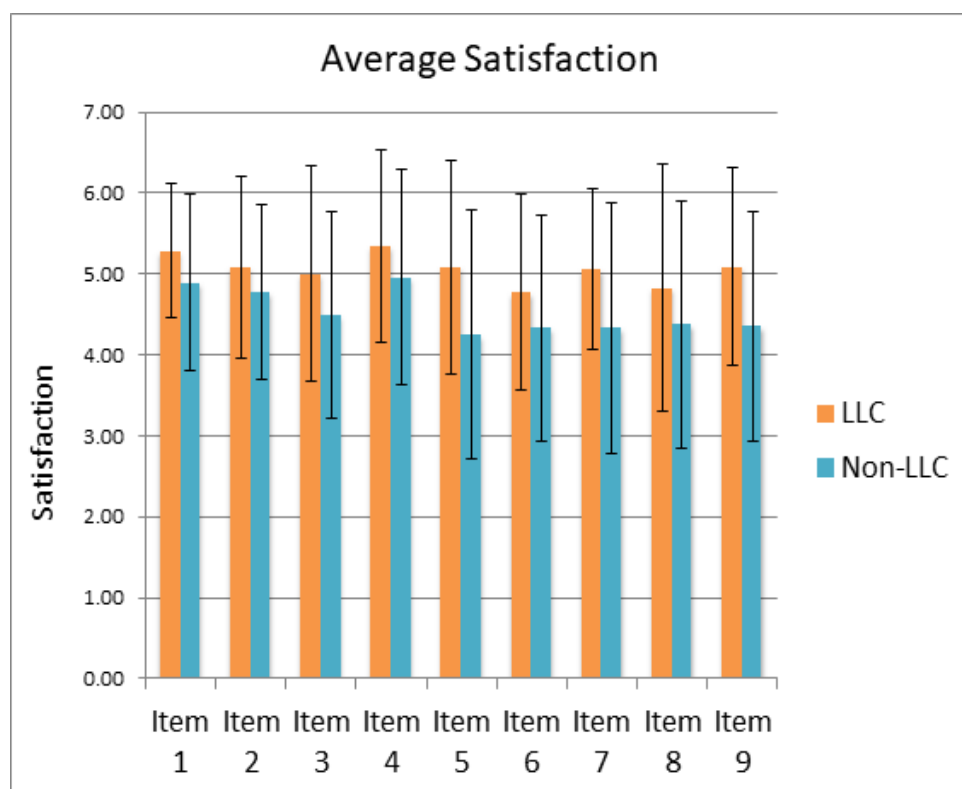


Figure 1: Average satisfaction values of LLC (n=35) and non-LLC (n=45) for the entire survey. Error bars represent standard deviation.

Table 2 provides an itemized comparison of participants' answers for each question asked on the survey. Based on the two-tailed t-test, the only statistically significant differences in responses were found in items 5, 7, and 9, indicating higher LLC student satisfaction in these

items. These items also showed the largest difference in average answers. There are no statistically significant differences in responses for the remainder of the prompts. Overall, satisfaction was greatest in building friendships and academic involvement, and weakest in faculty involvement and programming, although responses were still positive to these prompts. The breakdown can be seen below.

Table 2

Item 1: Living on campus has been an enjoyable experience.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.29	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.89	Agree

Item 2: Living on campus has helped me succeed academically.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.09	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.78	Agree

Item 3: Living on campus has made me feel more confident about pursuing my major.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.00	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.49	Slightly Agree

Item 4: I have made friends within my residence hall.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.34	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.96	Agree

Item 5: I have been able to connect with students within my major.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.09	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.24	Slightly Agree

Item 6: I have been able to connect to faculty and staff (professors, advisors, etc.) within my major.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	4.77	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.33	Slightly Agree

Item 7: I have been connected to resources (tutoring, advising, etc.) around campus specific to my major.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.06	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.33	Slightly Agree



Item 8: I have enjoyed attending RA programs (floor programs, building wide programs, and/or LLC programs).

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	4.83	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.38	Slightly Agree

Item 9: I have had opportunities to get involved with organizations pertaining to my major.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC Students	35	5.09	Agree
Non-LLC Students	45	4.36	Slightly Agree

The interview data provided similar results to the survey questions. Of the ten LLC students interviewed, all interview respondents were able to identify multiple strengths of the living learning communities, including meeting students within their major, having other students to study with, and having a mentor in their major. Individual students commented on finding opportunities to get involved within their major, finding resources around campus pertaining to their major, and feeling more academically successful. Every student answered that they would recommend joining a living learning community to incoming students.

Interview participants also identified areas of growth for the LLCs, mainly regarding the involvement of faculty members within the living learning communities. Individual respondents reported wanting more connections with students outside of their LLC, more programming, and having more students in the LLCs.

Overall, the consensus among the LLC students interviewed was that the LLCs are effective for creating an enhanced learning experience, but there are several ways in which the LLCs could grow to support students more. Students indicated that LLC programming was educational and engaging, and being connected to other students before the academic year started made the transition into college smoother. Students commented the most on the social aspects of the LLCs, and how the LLCs either helped them make friends in their major, or at least connect with other students to study with, which also contributed positively to their academic experiences. Students reported wanting more access to faculty members either through programming or study sessions, and an increased connection to other students in different LLCs. The consensus among students was that the living learning communities are a good opportunity to connect with other students in their major, but could do more to ensure that students have a solid connection to faculty or staff within their major.

### **Resident Assistant Data**

Averaged responses of LLC resident assistants are located in Table 3. There were nine participants in the resident assistant data, and only LLC resident assistants were considered for this portion of the research. The total number of each response (strongly disagree – 1, disagree – 2, slightly disagree – 3, slightly agree – 4, agree – 5, and strongly agree – 6) were recorded for each response and used to calculate the mean. Standard deviations were included to show the differences in responses between the RAs for each prompt. Participant responses tended to be varied on each question, indicating that the mean may not always accurately reflect the opinions of the entire group. This is important to consider when analyzing the following data.

Table 3

	Average Satisfaction of LLC RAs	Standard Deviation
Item 1	4.56	1.424
Item 2	4.33	1.500
Item 3	4.89	0.928
Item 4	3.33	1.118
Item 5	4.11	1.364
Item 6	3.44	1.667
Item 7	3.67	1.000
Item 8	3.67	2.000
Item 9	4.33	1.581

The data conveys that RAs reported the highest overall satisfaction in items 1 and 3. Both of these items pertained to mentoring and leadership, which is one of the main functions of the position. To determine the effectiveness of components of being an LLC RA, the data is again compared against achieving a score of 4.5. Achieving a score of 4.5 to indicate effectiveness means that participants' answers, on average, landed above the "slightly agree" response option. Using this method, the data shows that the LLCs were effective in items 1 and 3, with all other items averaging below 4.5.

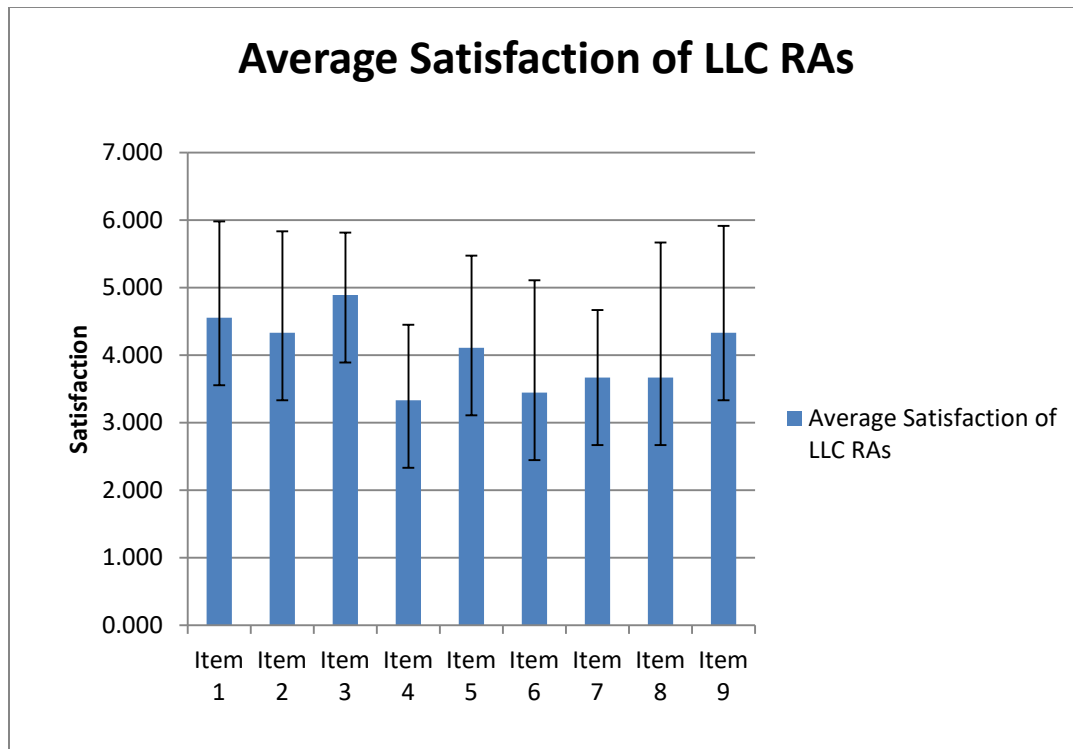


Figure 2: Average satisfaction values of LLC Resident Assistants (n=9) for the entire survey. Error bars represent standard deviation.

Table 4 provides an itemized breakdown of respondents' answers to each survey prompt. Based on these results, it is difficult to conclude the overall satisfaction with the LLC RA experience and whether or not the position is effective as a whole outside of the RA position itself. Satisfaction was greatest in the areas of mentoring and leadership, and weakest in training and faculty involvement.

Table 4

Item 1: I was able to serve as a mentor to and build relationships with my LLC residents.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	4.56	Agree

Item 2: I was able to connect my LLC residents to campus resources.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	4.33	Slightly Agree

Item 3: I was able to improve my leadership skills by being an LLC RA.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	4.89	Agree

Item 4: Training prepared me well to be an LLC RA.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	3.33	Slightly Disagree

Item 5: Serving as an LLC RA made me feel more connected to my major.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	4.11	Slightly Agree

Item 6: I utilized my faculty advisor when programming for my living learning community.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	3.44	Slightly Disagree

Item 7: I felt that my programming efforts were educational, informative, and beneficial for my LLC residents.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	3.67	Slightly Agree

Item 8: I felt that my weekly community hours were beneficial for my LLC residents.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	3.67	Slightly Agree

Item 9: I feel that I have worked my hardest to make this LLC the best that it can be.

	Number of Students	Average Response (numeric)	Average Response (agreement)
LLC RAs	9	4.33	Agree

The interview data provided some answers that reflected data present in the surveys, and some data that was not clear in the surveys. Of the six LLC resident assistants interviewed, all respondents reported that the most beneficial part of being an LLC RA was getting to know their LLC residents and being able to grow in a leadership position. Other individuals reported that the beneficial aspects of being an LLC RA were a monetary stipend, meeting students with different interests but a similar major, and building their mentoring skills. The balance between socialization and academics was a major point in the majority of interviews, and RAs reported that they did their best to strike a balance between academics and socialization to make programs fun and educational for their students. Every respondent answered that they would recommend being an LLC RA to future students and/or current RAs.

Interview participants reported that the main area of growth for their LLC was faculty involvement. Individual respondents reported that training was also an area that needed improvement, as well as bigger programs to encompass the needs of more LLC students and to bring students from different LLCs together. A common concern that occurred in every interview pertained to LLC faculty advisors. When asked these questions, the majority of RAs reported that they used them little, did not know they had an LLC faculty advisor, or that they did not have an advisor. Because of these concerns, many RAs reported similar suggestions for improving the LLC RA experience, most of which included more explicit training, more off campus programming support, increasing student interest in the LLCs, and a more supportive and inclusive attitude towards the LLCs in general.

Many responses had answers that were positive or negative, depending on the individual. This aligned with the varied answers to each prompt on the survey. Prompts that received diversified answers consisted of questions about open-door hours, the overall benefit of being an LLC RA, and the overall relationships between LLC RAs and their students. Leaders that reported negatively on these components tended to have smaller LLCs with low student interest, while leaders that answered positively had large LLCs that had high levels of student interest and involvement.

## **Discussion**

Living learning communities have the ability to provide a plethora of benefits, whether the LLC is in its humble beginnings or an established organization within an institution (Stassen, 2003). In this case, I studied whether the living learning community model at The University of Akron is an effective model for changing the experience of students and student leaders.

Although students and RAs reported different areas of successes and growth for the LLCs, it is important to consider the differences in LLCs, the differences in experiences of students and RAs before being part of the living learning community, and the overall expectation that students and RAs had for their living learning community for the year. Although not all aspects of a living learning community resulted in statistically significant higher satisfaction rates than non-LLC students, our living learning community models are effective, containing multiple areas of success, while also possessing room for growth in other areas.

The areas for success within the living learning communities align with the goals of the LLCs as defined by the Department of Residence Life and Housing at The University of Akron. One of the main focuses was building upon student academics, as is the goal of most living learning communities. Based on responses from students and resident assistants on surveys and interviews, LLC students and LLC resident assistants reported feeling more connected to their major. The academic successes were largely dependent on socialization with other students in the major, as was evidenced by interview responses. Resident assistants were able to teach material to students, plan programs regarding course content, or work with faculty or full-time employees in relevant fields to plan their programs, providing multiple socialization outlets for RAs and students. LLC students started the year knowing several other students in their major, which many students reported to be an asset. These students started the year off with a mentor in their major, some connections to faculty members, and a small to large cohort of students pursuing a similar major. Students also were more likely to get involved with organizations pertaining to their major, providing yet another outlet for students to interact with their peers outside of the classroom and in a natural, conversational setting. Studies have reported that students who interact with their content area outside of the classroom through involvement or social



interaction have stronger connections to their major and have a more impactful learning experience (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). This study upholds that finding, and the socialization aspects were a highly successful component of this living learning community model.

Programming is also a fundamental component of Akron's living learning communities, which also contributed to students' overall academic experience and provided another outlet for socialization between students, RAs, and faculty. Although there is arguably always room for improvement when it comes to program or event planning, LLC survey respondents reported that programs were often enjoyable. However, it is not possible to determine to what degree students considered LLC programs when answering that question, so interview responses prove to be more insightful. Because students claimed that programs were engaging and educational, it can be concluded that programming was also effective in contributing to students' overall academic experience. By providing three programs per semester that are specific to that major or interest, students are able to learn more information in a comfortable setting, whether that may be about scheduling classes, finding a job, or connecting with people in the field. Although students reported a desire for more faculty involvement in future programming, the conclusion can be drawn that programming in its current state is effective for LLC students.

A particular difference that I have noticed about The University of Akron's living learning community model is the inclusion of RAs within the living learning community. There are many different ways to incorporate upperclassmen students in residential learning communities, but The University of Akron made the decision to utilize student staff members that would already have connections with students in the residence hall through their RA position. Although I cannot comment on the success of the LLCs at other institutions, I think that

the Department of Residence Life and Housing's choice to incorporate RAs in this process allowed for enhanced community building and a seamless experience between being a resident and being a member of an LLC. As LLC RAs reported, the position does not entail much extra work, but there is a very strong community on every floor with a living learning community, and all students reported feeling as though they had made friends in their major. It is worth considering that the LLC RAs' roles as resident assistants and student leaders made a more cohesive experience for students and benefitted their socialization opportunities in a positive way.

One of the ways in which programming could have been improved was through faculty involvement, and this was reported by both LLC students and resident assistants. Both students and RAs reported that they would have liked to see increased faculty involvement. However, one of the major problems with faculty involvement came from a lack of knowledge about faculty advisors on the resident assistant side of the LLCs. Every RA interviewee reported that they did not use their faculty advisor often, did not know they had one, or did not know who they were. Establishing these connections between RAs and their faculty advisors can foster an environment where academics have more chances to come to life within the residence hall. After completing the RA selection process, it could be beneficial for RAs to meet their faculty advisors before summer begins, so RAs and their faculty advisors can work on programming initiatives throughout the summer. Building that relationship early will not only make the RAs' duties easier, but will also allow for a better connection between LLC students and faculty advisors because the advisors will be more invested in the LLC and its students. There must be a strong connection between the student leader and the faculty advisor to create an integrated experience

of socialization, academics, and faculty involvement, and as of now, the LLCs seem to be lacking these connections.

The often missing connection to faculty advisors could be linked to inefficient training for LLC RAs. Every LLC RA commented on the lack of training they received for the position, feeling as though LLC training was more of an information session than how to perform well in the position. This was especially so for mid-year hires, who expressed concerns that they received little to no LLC training. Having a separate day for LLC training could provide a day for leaders to meet their faculty members, receive more explicit instruction on the goals of the LLC, brainstorm effective programs, and give LLC RAs the opportunity to come together to plan LLC-wide initiatives that require more logistical planning than regular programs. Two RAs also reported wanting to have a specific LLC advisor outside of their RA supervisor, whose main priority is the living learning communities and ensuring their success. Prior to the transition from LLC peer mentors to LLC RAs, a specific graduate assistant oversaw the LLCs, but the position was eliminated during the shift in LLC structure. Reinstating this position could be beneficial for both LLC RAs and the LLC students. Prioritizing the LLCs in these ways and giving them a greater weight and sense of importance could motivate RAs to plan better programs and work with their faculty advisors. About half of the leaders reported feeling like this position came down to only having to put on three extra programs, and perhaps this attitude towards the LLCs and lack of support is where some of these problems tie in.

Garnering a better attitude about the importance of LLCs could also help promote a greater sense of student interest in the program. While some of The University of Akron's LLCs are on the larger side, some of the LLCs are small, containing only five to ten students. LLC students in small LLCs commented on the lack of involvement and passion in LLCs, from both

the students and their RAs. Small numbers can also be problematic for RA programming because planning programs that involve outside speakers coming to the hall or attending an event can reflect the Department of Residence Life and Housing poorly if only a few students attend the program, even though that may be a high percentage of LLC students. One RA reported feeling as though their position would be more meaningful if more students participated in his LLC, while another RA reported that their LLC was not posted on the LLC website. If students are not intentionally made aware that an LLC exists, it will have a small number of members, RAs may feel unmotivated to perform the extra work in their role to enhance LLC students' experience, and this perpetuates the lack of awareness about the LLC. This problem is cyclical, and heavily recruiting LLC students and promoting RA interest and improving training could help alleviate this problem. Again, a specific advisor for the LLCs could be beneficial in this regard. Perhaps a model where students are automatically sorted into an LLC could assuage this problem and is something that could be further studied.

### **Conclusion**

As studies have found, having a living learning community is going to be beneficial in some way for students, whether an LLC is at its humble beginnings or in its fifteenth year at an institution. The quality of this learning and the effect of the LLCs are determined by success in different components of the living learning communities, including authentic socialization and effective programming. The University of Akron's LLCs are beneficial for students in creating an environment where students are able to meet and work with other students in similar academic programs. Their socialization occurs naturally and contributes positively to their academics throughout their first year of college. The LLCs would benefit the most from

increasing student, faculty, and RA interest in their respective LLCs, and would see the most growth from investing time and energy into finding ways to recruit students and strengthen connections between faculty members and resident assistants. The University of Akron's living learning communities have room to continue growing to meet the academic needs of their students and to continue promoting a positive environment where students can live, learn, and foster relationships.

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